United Nations E/CN.17/2013/2

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
5 August 2013

Original: English

Commission on Sustainable Development
Twentieth session
20 September 2013
Lessons learned from the Commission on Sustainable Development, and the way forward

Discussion papers submitted by major groups on strengthening public participation at the United Nations for sustainable development

Note by the Secretariat

1. The Johannesburg Plan of Implementation and the decisions of the eleventh session of the Commission on Sustainable Development (see E/2003/29) called for strengthened involvement and enhanced participation of major groups in the activities of the Commission on Sustainable Development, as well as in the implementation of Agenda 21, the Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation.

2. Likewise, Heads of State and Government, in the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development entitled "The future we want" (General Assembly resolution 66/288, annex), acknowledged the role of civil society and the importance of enabling all members of civil society to be actively engaged in sustainable development. They recognized that improved participation of civil society depended upon, inter alia, strengthening access to information and building civil society capacity and an enabling environment. In paragraphs 46 to 53, in particular, they acknowledged the role that all major groups of civil society played in sustainable development through various channels and stressed the importance of the participation of all those groups.

3. The General Assembly, in paragraphs 13 to 16 of its resolution 67/290 on the format and organizational aspects of the high-level political forum on sustainable development, acknowledged the importance of the regional dimension of sustainable development and invited the United Nations regional commissions to contribute to the work of the forum, including through annual regional meetings, with the involvement of other relevant regional entities, major groups and other relevant stakeholders, as appropriate; stressed the need for the forum to promote transparency and implementation by further enhancing the consultative role and participation of the major groups and other relevant stakeholders at the international

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level in order to make better use of their expertise and decided that the forum would be open to the major groups, other relevant stakeholders and entities having received a standing invitation to participate as observers in the Assembly, building on arrangements and practices observed by the Commission on Sustainable Development which would be applicable to the forum; decided that the representatives of the major groups and other relevant stakeholders would be allowed to attend and intervene in all official meetings of the forum, submit and have access to documents, present contributions, make recommendations and organize side events and round tables, in cooperation with Member States and the Secretariat; and encouraged major groups to autonomously establish and maintain effective coordination mechanisms for participation in the high-level political forum and for actions derived from that participation at the global, regional and national levels, in a way that ensures effective, broad and balanced participation by region and by type of organization.

4. Also in the outcome document, Heads of State and Government called for the launch of an inclusive intergovernmental process to develop a set of sustainable development goals, to be consistent with the post-2015 agenda.

5. Together, these events, as well as the global increase in awareness of the concept of sustainable development, are increasing the demand from new stakeholders to join the high-level political forum discussions and agenda-setting.

6. It is therefore appropriate that the Commission on Sustainable Development, at its twentieth and final session, take into account lessons learned and recommendations from the participation of major groups in the 20 years of the Commission, as well as recommendations for engagement modalities for the high-level political forum.

7. An independent report commissioned by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat through its Division for Sustainable Development offers a number of recommendations aimed at the United Nations, major groups and Member States drawn both from a desk review and from extensive interviews with current members and non-members of major groups that have expressed interest in engaging in the work of the United Nations on sustainable development. The report found strong support for the continuation and strengthening of the major group framework, which enables a diversity of voices, albeit with greater inclusiveness, transparency and accountability.

8. The report underwent an extensive consultation process within major groups and other stakeholders and was sent to all stakeholders for a final fact-checking exercise.

9. The analysis and recommendations could help bring a greater constituency, a better-balanced regional and gender perspective and more transparency and buy-in, as well as accountability in implementing the United Nations sustainable development agenda.

Strengthening public participation at the United Nations for sustainable development: dialogue, debate, dissent, deliberation

Summary of recommendations*

United Nations, including the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the Secretariat

1. **Consultations on criteria for new major groups**. The Department of Economic and Social Affairs should hold consultations with members of major groups and organizations that are interested in becoming more active in the major group framework. These consultations would determine criteria for the establishment of new major groups, as well as the means to recognize and support other forms of organizing within the major group framework, including through the use of clusters and a "flexible slot" for temporary participation.

2. **Making the process more relevant with a view to the participation of social movements**. Social movements should be better recognized in United Nations processes by moving from consultative to more deliberative spaces. For instance, social movements participating in global United Nations conferences often focus their perspectives and demands through parallel events and activities. The outcome of these should be better integrated in the official process.

3. **Demonstrating the value of the interface**. The United Nations should take the lead in making its processes more relevant and attractive to major groups and other stakeholders. This means building a space and interface that would make their interaction with policy processes more valuable. The United Nations should also include more support structures for major groups and other stakeholders to ensure meaningful and timely interactions with senior United Nations officials and governance bodies.

4. **Coherence and improved United Nations coordination**. More coherence is needed from and across the United Nations units engaging with civil society organizations to support a two-way process. Special attention and new modalities are needed to strengthen coherence not only at the Headquarters and global levels but also between the global, regional and national levels. The United Nations Development Group, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the United Nations Development Programme and the resident coordinators should foster coherence in their engagement with major groups and other stakeholders.

5. **Emphasis on the regional and local levels and improved coherence between global, regional and national processes**. The United Nations should better showcase the outcome of national and regional processes at the global level. Reporting and discussion of local experiences should be encouraged.

6. **More language diversity**. The United Nations should find the means to disseminate information not only in English but, preferably, in all official languages.

7. **Public disclosure and conflict of interest policies**. All United Nations entities involved in partnerships for sustainable development and multi-stakeholder

* The full report is available from http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?menu=1564.

initiatives should hold open consultations with the public and businesses from both within and outside the major group framework in order to establish clear and transparent public disclosure and conflict of interest policies, which should be made available online.

8. **Rights of participation, building on best practices throughout the United Nations system**. Participation rights include access to information and to meetings, speaking rights, the right to submit documents, the right to provide expertise and the inclusion of major groups' and other stakeholders' contributions in official documents and in shaping the agenda.

9. **Recognizing and drawing on major groups' and other stakeholder expertise**. Civil society experts, including people from the grass roots, should be involved in any panel of experts, working group or equivalent body related to the high-level political forum.

10. **Official record of major groups' and other stakeholders' input**. Major groups' and other stakeholders' inputs, including analyses, statements, interventions during round tables and compilations of national and regional consultations, should be circulated in official documents to Member States and relevant United Nations entities. Such documentation would not simply transcribe and aggregate the inputs but organize them for consideration during the policy and deliberative processes.

11. **Better administrative support for the major groups**. Options to provide better administrative support to the major groups should be explored, including the possibility of a small independent secretariat modelled on the secretariat of the International Food Security and Nutrition Civil Society Mechanism. The secretariat could take the lead in organizing capacity-building meetings, in particular at the regional level, and reach out to organizations that are not currently participating in the major group framework.

12. **Regular briefings**. Each year, the United Nations should arrange at least one town hall meeting-style briefing for major groups and other stakeholders to discuss key input and processes. These should reach organizations working at the regional and national levels.

13. **Better use of information and communications technology**. Better use should be made of information and communications technology to ensure participation by a wide range of groups and individuals outside United Nations Headquarters and to facilitate openness and fair and inclusive sharing of information, as well as collective organizing and coalescing around positions.

14. **Prioritizing people on the front lines**. Given that the space for major groups' and other stakeholders' participation and input is limited, especially when it comes to opportunities for speaking, it should be occupied in priority by those on the front lines (such as forest and slum dwellers, small farmers, etc.). This requires appropriate direct funding for participation from the United Nations and Member States.

15. **No regression**. The modalities adopted by the high-level political forum for engagement with major groups and other stakeholders should not regress with respect to either current formal and informal practices at the Commission on Sustainable Development or internationally agreed principles and rights.

16. **Autonomy and respect for self-organization**. Members of major groups affirm their right to self-organize and the importance of having United Nations policy processes recognize and respect the product of this self-organization. The Secretary-General himself acknowledges this right (see E/CN.17/2003/2, annex VI).

17. **Recognition of diversity**. Respect the diversity of voices. Interfaces between United Nations policy processes and civil society have shown success when they give space for the expression of diversity and do not force civil society to speak with one voice.

18. **Clear mandate/terms of reference**. Some members of major groups argue that the framework is too informal and leaves too much space for those present at United Nations Headquarters to make decisions for and act on behalf of the group without sufficient consultations. The application of guidelines developed by and for the organizing partners could help ensure that all groups are appropriately consulted before any action is taken by any particular major group.

Major groups

19. **More structure in major groups' governance**. Apply the organizing partners' developed guidelines to clearly define their role and their responsibility to both consult with their constituency and keep it informed of developments, what constitutes a major group statement and when organizing partners or other major group members can speak in the name of the major group as a whole.

20. **Minimum standard for a major group statement**. A set of minimum criteria should be established to clarify what constitutes a major group statement. These could include a minimum consultation period, a minimum number of participants providing input and requirements for gender and regional balance among participants.

21. **More language diversity**. Efforts should be made to ensure that organizing partners collectively have multilingual capacity by selecting organizing partners of multilingual capacity and/or by making sure that the organizing partners come from constituencies speaking different languages. Organizing partners should also make use of rough online translations of documents.

22. **Strengthening and supporting the non-governmental organizations major group**. Better self-organizing of the non-governmental organizations major group's space is a priority. This could involve the creation of "clusters" used at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development or more regional representation within the group itself. This would facilitate effective engagement with the intergovernmental process.

23. **Emphasis on the regional and local levels**. Major groups should build on or reflect the result of national and regional consultations in their statements.

24. **Recognition of diversity**. Diversity of views is precisely what civil society brings to the table. Diversity is the most compelling reason to involve major groups in the priority-setting process.

25. **Clear mandate/terms of reference, accountability and transparency**. Apply the guidelines that organizing partners developed for their governance, which deal with accountability and transparency by clarifying how organizing partners can be

selected and reselected and how they can give or receive feedback on the quality of participation.

26. **Gender and regional balance**. Both gender and regional balance in the composition of the major groups' organizing partners are absolutely essential to ensuring that the framework is inclusive and representative. One way to do so is to increase the number of organizing partners from two to five or more in order to create regional organizing partners. This would ensure that the process is not too narrowly focused on what happens at Headquarters in New York and would help bridge the disconnect perceived by some major groups between organizing partners and their constituency. Organizing partners could also be selected to focus on thematic issues, and temporary focal points could be chosen to address time-bound processes.

27. **Inclusiveness, including outreach**. Organizations for which an effective major group structure is most needed include: small community-based organizations; those without a presence at United Nations Headquarters; those that are less familiar with United Nations processes; and/or those that do not have the opportunity to express their views or formally interact with delegates from Member States or United Nations staff. Major groups should actively reach out to these organizations to facilitate their participation and give them priority.

28. **Prioritizing people on the front lines**. Organizing partners should make specific efforts to create opportunities for active engagement, in particular when it comes to speaking opportunities for those on the front lines (such as forest and slum dwellers, small farmers, etc.).

Member States

29. **Adequate, predictable and timely funding from Member States**. A wide range of Member States should finance a multi-donor trust fund to be administered by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs aimed at supporting major group and other stakeholder engagement with the high-level political forum and carry over any remaining funds from the Trust Fund to Support the Work of the Commission on Sustainable Development.

30. **Re-establishment of multi-stakeholder dialogues**. These dialogues can be better integrated in the official process if moderated by a high-level official of the high-level political forum, who can include a summary of the dialogue in the formal text of the forum's session and provide enough time and space for all relevant stakeholders to contribute while avoiding perceptions that this will be an additional burden.

31. **Application of the "no regression" principle**. The modalities for engagement of major groups and other stakeholders with the high-level political forum should not regress with respect to either current formal and informal practices at the Commission on Sustainable Development or internationally agreed principles and rights.

32. **Public disclosure and conflict of interest policies**. All Member States involved in partnerships and multi-stakeholder initiatives should hold open consultations with public interest and business interest non-governmental organizations to establish clear and transparent public disclosure and conflict of interest policies. All information from these consultations should be posted online.

33. **Rights of participation, building on best practices throughout the United Nations system**. Member States should acknowledge and encourage the right to participation in their interactions with major groups.

34. **Recognizing and drawing on major groups' and other stakeholder expertise**. In keeping with the commitment to the right to participate, civil society experts, including people from the grass roots, should be involved in any panel of experts, working group or equivalent body set up to support the work of the high-level political forum.

35. **Official record of major groups' and other stakeholders' input**. Major groups' and other stakeholders' inputs should be circulated as official documents to Member States and other relevant parties in the analysis and deliberative processes. These documents should be used to the fullest extent by Member States and other relevant parties.

36. **Participation in regular briefings**. Member States should actively participate and engage in the annual town hall meeting-style briefing for major groups and other stakeholders to discuss key inputs and processes.